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Company Celebrations in International Firms in Bulgaria. Are We What We Celebrate?

Abstract. Workplace celebrations are a festive genre influenced by local and global socio-economic transformations and cultural trends. This article presents a qualitative study of company celebrations in international firms in Bulgaria. Festivities, which are the object of study, are conceptualised as a medium through which identities are constructed, managed, and shared. The goal is to explore labour relations through the prism of such non-work events and trace the dynamics between the local and the international, between notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, individual and organisational identities. The presented case studies are based on in-depth interviews with a range of stakeholders and on participant observation in celebrations organised by firms for their employees.

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Introduction

The 1985 Bulgarian movie ‘Manoeuvres on the Fifth Floor’ is a comedy about three colleagues and friends who work in a state industrial-research institute. When the new director first meets the three main characters, he finds them starting the workday with a birthday celebration. ‘We are a very cohesive collective,’ one of them says apologetically. The director very willingly joins the birthday toast while saying to his deputy: ‘This is the kind of people I need, not clerks—they might make a razzle but they will also get the job done.’ The conflict in the story is introduced through the potential opportunity for just one of the three colleagues to go on a work trip to Japan. Their desperate attempts to get the coveted trip abroad sets in motion all kinds of ‘manoeuvres’—from dirty tricks to favours for the superiors in the hierarchy. The resolution is reached at the institute banquet, when the lead characters learn that it will be the new director who will go on the trip and all their efforts were in vain.

This movie is often remembered as a popular-culture document of the social, economic, and cultural value of the work trip abroad during socialism. This

was one of the indicators of success, both professionally and personally, at the time, whereas nowadays work trips abroad have become a sign of precarity in many cases.¹ In addition to the strong appetite for international experience, the movie stages another symbolic figure of the socialist work life—that of the banquet and the celebrating workers. Festive events are related to the cohesiveness of the organisation, not part of the formal work process, but, as in this fictional case, they can be the occasion for important work-related developments. The socialist period was characterised by a centralised, top-down approach to festive culture driven by an understanding of celebrations as tools for moulding shared identities and societal priorities.² The instrumental approach is explicitly stated by the socialist-period head of state, Todor Zhivkov:

In general, the problem here is to master the process of development of festivities and rituals, to improve the entire holiday-ritual system, so that we can form new holidays in a timely manner, to terminate others that have been outlived, to transform others and so on.³

The year 1989 marks the difficult beginning of the socioeconomic transformation of the country, also described as ‘surviving post-socialism’.⁴ In this context, the ritual excess of the preceding period came to a halt, particularly in rural areas. This decline ‘became a symbol of state lack of interest and withdrawal, complementing political exasperation and economic disillusionment’.⁵ This implied relative decline of state control over cultural production and the rejection of socialist-time cultural codes and ideological imaginaries, but it also meant there was a lack of avenues for citizen participation. New agents, economic but also cultural, had to fill this void and initiate new, and adapt existing, cultural practices in the ongoing transformation process.

One of the exacerbating economic factors after 1989 was the low level of foreign direct investment (FDI). As can be expected, FDI was perceived as a potential solution: ‘foreign participation in the process of transformation was expected to be of importance for supplying the country with a new pattern of

¹ Raya Apostolova, *Borba v komandirovka*, *Dversia*, 27 January 2019, <https://dversia.net/4450/borba-v-komandirovka/>. All internet references were accessed on 17 August 2020.

² Nadia Velcheva, *Praznik v delnika*, Sofia 1989.

³ Todor Zhivkov, *Niakoi saobrazhenia otnosno po-natatashnoto razvitie na praznichno obrednata sistema v NRB*, *Izbrani Sachinenia*, no. 27 (1980), 12–29, cited in Margarita Krasteva-Stoichevska, *Nefolklorna kultura i folklorni iavlenia (kam razvitiето na bulgarskite narodni tanci)*, 1944–1990, Sofia 2010, 105.

⁴ Ulf Brunnbauer, *Surviving Post-Socialism. The First Decade of Transformation in Bulgaria*, *Sociologija* 43, no. 1 (2001), 1–26.

⁵ Gerald W. Creed, *Economic Crisis and Ritual Decline in Eastern Europe*, in: Chris Hann, ed., *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, London 2002, 57–73, 70.

behaviour.⁶ The level of FDI was lower than expected in the beginning of the transition period, but it did rise significantly, particularly in the period leading up to the country's EU accession in 2007, and then declined after the 2008 crisis.⁷ What is of interest for this study is the fact that, at present, Bulgarian subsidiaries of international companies dominate both the list of the biggest employers in the country,⁸ and even more so, the list of the most preferred companies to work for, according to studies conducted among university students and people already in the labour market.⁹ In other words, it can be considered that the long-expected foreign participation managed to achieve a presence significant enough to affect local business practices and culture.

The effect of FDI on the country's economic development has been discussed both in national and international academic forums.¹⁰ The purpose of this article is to explore the cultural aspects of these 'new patterns of behaviour' that foreign firms were expected to introduce, by focusing on workplace celebrations. Work-related festivities are a cultural practice with a long social history, dating back to ancient seasonal festivities marking the end of annual work cycles. Nowadays, examples of such festivities include year-end celebrations, company anniversaries, award ceremonies, etc. These are instances outside everyday business operations, and although they are often mentioned in job advertisements in the list of benefits a position offers, they are not a contractual obligation, either for the employer or for the employee. In the contemporary context, they are a genre of public celebration (as opposed to personal occasions such as birthdays, marriages, etc.), and, as such, they are occasions for explicit and implicit, performative and discursive, representations of fundamental principles, ideas, and values guiding social interaction, and in this case, underlying business activity. The specific focus of this study is workplace celebrations organised by employers for their employees, hence corporate events for

⁶ Malinka Koparanova, Overview of Foreign Direct Investments in Bulgaria in the Middle of the 1990s, *Eastern European Economics* 36, no. 2 (1998), 5–14, DOI: 10.1080/00128775.1998.11648664.

⁷ The World Bank Group, Foreign Direct Investment, Net Inflows (% of GDP)–Bulgaria, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.WD.GD.ZS?end=2018&locations=BG&start=1980&view=chart>.

⁸ Mina Stoyčeva, Koi sa nai-golemite rabotodateli v Balgariya?, *Money.bg*, 24 September 2019, <https://money.bg/companies/koi-sa-nay-golemite-rabotodateli-v-balgariya.html>.

⁹ Koi e nai-jelan rabotodatel sred raboteshtite hora v Balgariya?, *Investor.bg*, 19 June 2019, <https://www.investor.bg/ikonomika-i-politika/332/a/koi-e-nai-jelan-rabotodatel-sred-raboteshtite-hora-v-bylgariia-284221/>.

¹⁰ e. g. Brunnbauer, Surviving Post-Socialism; Dimitar Ganchev, Prekrite chuzhdestranni investicii za perioda 1992–2008. Izvdi i novi predizvikatelstva, *Ikonomicheski Alternativi*, no. 2 (2010), 40–56; Stoyan Totev, Foreign Direct Investment in Bulgaria. Advantages and Disadvantages to Investment, *SEER. South-East Europe Review for Labour and Social Affairs* 8, no. 4 (2005), 91–104, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43293131>.

partners and customers are not included in the object of study, in order to focus on employment relations. Seminars or training, which can also include a party or some other form of entertainment, would also not be defined as company celebrations, because of the direct link they have with work processes, as forms of additional qualification that can be compulsory.

Workplace celebrations are conceptualised as a platform for expressing (or rejecting) identity claims, for reflecting and perpetuating perceptions about business and employee success. By examining such occasions, the goal of the article is to study the construction of this festive genre on the one hand, and on the other, to add another perspective on the impact of international firms—as agents of transformation of societal norms and cultural practices.¹¹

This study is empirical and based on participant observation in company celebrations and in-depth interviews with different stakeholders, including management, staff in charge of events, subcontractors (e. g. event agencies, performers), and employees. The majority of respondents have preferred to remain anonymous, and the names of the companies are not identified either. Company celebrations are analysed as cultural practices that arise at the intersection of global cultural flows and local conditions. How and why are these practices invented, adapted, transformed, or appropriated and what are the points of reference in this process? What is celebrated, by whom, and with what underlining logic? In order to address these questions a multi-sited ethnographic method is applied, taking into consideration the limited duration of celebrations as a research object. The intentions and motivations of the agents organising the events have been brought to the fore with an interest in their role of cultural-practice generators. The audiences they address are heterogeneous, and employees have been found to react with ‘shades of engagement’, from enthusiasm to escape and endurance, towards organised fun.¹² The cases presented here come from a range of different organisations—from foreign-owned industrial plants in the countryside that date back to the 1950s, to branches of global high-tech companies in premium offices in the capital Sofia. This variance does not allow for unequivocal answers to the above questions. Furthermore, as will be discussed, present-day festivity is marked by fluidity and diversity, driven by a range of factors, including the personality of the organisational leader, the salience of popular-culture images, consumer culture, or

¹¹ For a discussion of the ‘firm as a social actor’ concept cf. David A. Whetten / Alison Mackey, A Social Actor Conception of Organizational Identity and Its Implications for the Study of Organizational Reputation, *Business & Society* 41, no. 4 (2002), 393–414, DOI: 10.1177/0007650302238775.

¹² Sharon C. Bolton / Maeve Houlihan, Are We Having Fun Yet? A Consideration of Workplace Fun and Engagement, *Employee Relations* 31, no. 6 (2009), 556–568, DOI: 10.1108/01425450910991721.

long-established professional norms. The discussion of the empirical data is contextualised through an outline, which follows, of the relevant theoretical vantage points in relation to the notion of 'the celebration', its functions, and uses, including in managerial discourse.

'We are What We Celebrate' – Festive Theories

In a provocative essay, the French author Michel Houellebecq claims that the purpose of celebration is 'to make us forget that we are lonely, miserable and doomed to death'.¹³ Although the author is sceptical of the potential to achieve in practice a bonding experience (with the exception of religious ceremonies), the expectation for celebrations to be communal and life-affirming occasions is implied. In anthropology, holidays or celebrations are treated as special chronotopes that have a primarily integrative function—they bring together the community in a shared time and space, they reaffirm the feeling of a shared identity, they provide the opportunity for people to meet, communicate, share their experiences and joy, exchange gifts, or, in Durkheim's terms, such occasions create collective effervescence.¹⁴

In theoretical and practical terms, celebrations and rituals are placed outside the everyday space and time. In sociological theory, holidays are defined as 'days on which custom or the law dictates a suspension of general business activity in order to commemorate or celebrate a particular event'.¹⁵ The term 'holidays' here is used as encompassing both holidays and rituals, because they are considered to serve the same basic role in a society. In Bulgarian, празник designates both holiday and celebration. In ritual studies, festivities are treated as a universal ritual type found across cultures.¹⁶ There is variance in the way attendants are involved—the more passive they are expected to be, the more the event functions as a performance; the more active the participants are in creating together the event, the more it heads in the direction of ritual and play.

From a functional perspective, Amitai Etzioni proposes to distinguish between recommitment holidays and tension-management holidays. Recommitment holidays or celebrations 'use drama, narrative and ceremonies to directly enforce commitment to shared beliefs'.¹⁷ During tension-management holidays, which can be considered as more playful occasions, generally upheld

¹³ Mišel Uelbek, *Praznikat*, *Literaturen Vestnik*, 15 July 2017, <https://litvestnik.wordpress.com/2017/07/15/мишел-уелбек/>.

¹⁴ e. g. Edith Turner, *Communitas. The Anthropology of Collective Joy*, New York 2012.

¹⁵ Amitai Etzioni / Jared Bloom, eds, *We Are What We Celebrate. Understanding Holidays and Rituals*, New York 2004, 6.

¹⁶ Barry Stephenson, *Ritual. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2015, 113.

¹⁷ Etzioni / Bloom, *We Are What We Celebrate*, 11.

norms are suspended to allow for indulgence, and forms of behaviour that are otherwise not allowed become temporarily acceptable. Another way to think of this distinction is to relate it to the opposition between the strictness of ritual and the freedom, even transgression, of carnival. Work-related celebrations, such as the object of this study, are generally categorised as tension-management holidays. However, both categories are ideal types, while actual events usually combine elements of the two.

Celebrations as Media

Another way of thinking about the functioning of public festivities is to draw a parallel between them and media—media being defined most broadly as platforms enabling communication between people.¹⁸ Long before the existence of radio, newspapers, TV, or digital media, public celebrations have been a space for old and new encounters and exchanges. Moreover, festive public events generally serve to uphold the status quo, they give those in power a platform to address their community, convey messages, and reaffirm shared values. This has also made public celebrations newsworthy and an increasingly mediated phenomenon in more recent times.

Media and celebrations are in a symbiotic relationship, drawing energy from each other. A festive event is not just covered by the media—the act of mediating it can also amplify it and co-create it. And in the case of social media, and the logic of ‘it hasn’t happened if it is not on Facebook/Instagram/...’, posting and sharing about a celebration is an indispensable part of the festive repertoire, and arguably a definitive part too. A recent analysis of the social media activity around two national Bulgarian holidays concluded that while physical participation in the public ceremonies organised by the government is low, online people post actively and in ways they see fit.¹⁹ In other words, the top-down, national, public, and institutional celebration is appropriated and made more intimate in the semi-private, semi-public social media. This act of sharing about a celebration is distinguished from the act of celebrating together, understood as a communal and also affective and bodily experience. Sharing content online is seen instead as an act of demonstration, a way of constructing one’s own identity contained in the online personal profile.

¹⁸ Ivaylo Ditchev, *Praznikat kato media*, *Bulgarian Ethnology*, no. 2 (2018), 167–177.

¹⁹ Lina Gergova, *Novi formi na praznuvane i praznichno suprejivavane v kiberprostranstvo*. *Dobre doshli v kiberia*. *Zapiski ot digitalnia teren*, Sofia 2014, 123–140.

Celebrations in the Context of Business

In the 1980s, Western managerial discourse and practices underwent a cultural turn, in which attention was focused on the notions of firm culture and corporate rites and rituals. The work of Deal and Kennedy from 1982 set out a new explanatory model for firm success, grounding it in organisational culture.²⁰ According to more recent discussion of their work, what they implied was a fully instrumental use of rites, rituals, and cultural engineering i. e. company culture as a concept was not introduced as an end in itself but as a strategic device for achieving business outcomes and building legitimacy.²¹ According to Costea et al., in the present-day work environments the focus on instrumentally used 'strong organisational culture' is replaced by a managerial discourse emphasising well-being.²² This shift, the authors argue, is driven from the bottom up, by the demand of employees as consumers of well-being lifestyles that need to be comprehensive, covering work, leisure, nutrition, fashion, etc. One of the expressions of this shift is the articulation and implementation of playfulness as an organisational virtue. In fact, thinking about bridging the gap between work and play, as postulated by scientific management, started in the 1908s, e. g.: '... it is functionally valuable for work organizations to diminish the dichotomy we experience between work and play. In doing so the work participants can better integrate the experience of work into life satisfaction'.²³ The trend has grown over past decades to the extent that it has been claimed that work and play become undistinguishable in the post-industrial organisation.²⁴

One of the influences on how workplace celebrations are conceptualised and implemented is the approach to corporate events organised for commercial purposes. Before employers started creating rites and rituals for their employees as part of engineered organisational cultures, the potential of festive events to engage customers emotionally and to serve business interests had already been recognised. In 1962, the social historian Daniel Boorstin criticised the 'pseudoevent' created by American companies for public relations and advertising purposes.²⁵ In this case, the mediated image takes full precedence over

²⁰ Terrence Deal / Allan Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures. The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*, Boston 1982.

²¹ Bogdan Costea / Norman Crump / John Holm, Dionysus at Work? The Ethos of Play and the Ethos of Management, *Culture and Organization* 11, no. 2 (2005), 139–151, DOI: 10.1080/14759550500091069.

²² Costea et al., Dionysus at Work? The Ethos of Play and the Ethos of Management.

²³ Thomas C. Dandridge, Ceremony as an Integration of Work and Play, *Organization Studies* 7, no. 2 (1986), 159–170, DOI: 10.1177/017084068600700205.

²⁴ Pat Kane, *The Play Ethic*, London 2004.

²⁵ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image. A Guide to Pseudoevents in America*, New York 2012, 50th anniversary ed. with an afterword by Douglas Rushkoff.

the lived experience. Boorstin argues that pseudoevents are distinguished from real events by four main factors: they are planned and not spontaneous; they are created with the goal to be covered in the media; what is important is that the media coverage is favourable, regardless of the underlying reality; and, they have the propensity to become self-fulfilling prophecies. By this definition, pseudoevents clearly cannot function as identity- and community-affirming celebrations, as understood in anthropological or sociological terms.

One of the criticisms of Boorstin is that while he defines what a pseudoevent is, it is less clear what constitutes the real or the authentic.²⁶ At the end of the 1990s, the marketing industry tried to reinvent itself by starting to focus on the 'experience' as the fundamental offer to be promoted for any underlying product or service. The marketing consultants Pine and Gilmore introduced the term 'experience economy' with the claim that there is a natural progression of economic value from commodity to good, service, and ultimately, experiences, understood as the opposite of hollow pseudoevents.²⁷ Experiences, they argue, are an existing but previously unarticulated genre of economic output. Drawing their inspiration from the immersive thematic experiences at Disney amusement parks, the authors claim that in any economy workers need to understand that 'every business is a stage and therefore work is theatre',²⁸ in which services are used as the stage and goods as props to engage the individual. The fundamental difference from previous economic offerings is that while they were always external to the consumer, the experience is inherently personal. Hence, it can be considered unique, and, very importantly, there is no such thing as an artificial experience.

Based on the above discussion, the starting point for analysing company celebrations is to treat them as media for expressing and constituting identities and guiding principles. In the case of the post-socialist countries, these events are particularly interesting because of the high level of ritualisation in the glorification of work during the socialist period, which after 1989 could not continue. When the state stopped providing detailed scripts for highly choreographed celebrations, and factories and plants became privately owned firms, a space was opened up for entanglement between existing practices and the inflow of new managerial models and cultural influences. In fact, according to Gudeman and Hann: 'The end of socialist planning and its displacement by capitalist market economies provided a unique opportunity to investigate the confluence

²⁶ Stephen Whitfield, *The Image. The Lost World of Daniel Boorstin*, *Reviews in American History* 19, no. 2 (1991), 302–312, DOI: 10.2307/2703088.

²⁷ B. Joseph Pine / James Gilmore, *The Experience Economy. Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*, Boston 1999.

²⁸ Pine / Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, x.

of economy and ritual.²⁹ In their comparative anthropological study of the connection between rituals and the economy, with a focus on the models and practices of the house economy, rituals are defined as market behaviour that cannot be explained solely by the logic of economising, even if they contribute to efficacy. The authors conclude that local sociality is sustained through such market behaviours, while in turn, the economy exists through sociality. This study is proposing a similar attempt to understand the non-economising ritualistic behaviours but at the level of the firm.

Being Part of a 'Global Family'

The family metaphor is often used in business discourse, arguably to demonstrate that organisational relations surpass the economic exchange that is at the basis of employment contracts. In the context of multinational companies, newly acquired or established business units in new locations are more often than not welcomed in the global family of the existing company through different discursive gestures—a speech by the CEO, a press release for the media or, more recently, a social media post. Within Critical Management Studies, the wide use of this metaphor has been criticised as 'manipulation of the workforce' and an 'exploitation of the emotional nature of human being' because 'family discourse employed by the businesses is a disciplinary and controlling device that enables employee to comply, obey, identify and associate with the business'.³⁰ The inflow of foreign capital to Bulgaria has made the local employees of international firms part of a large and multinational workforce, and the family metaphor has been used often in the course of fieldwork conducted with employees of different internationally owned companies.

Becoming part of a global 'team' is exactly what happened in a mineral extraction and processing company (Company A) located in south Bulgaria. After 1989, the company was first privatised by a management buyout in 1998, and then acquired by a Greek competitor in 2003. In 2015, the company was acquired by a new owner, a global leader in industrial minerals. The acquiring company was originally French, with operations in more than fifty countries across the globe and more than 16,000 employees. In other words, the Bulgarian company, dating back to 1951, has followed a trajectory, exemplary of global industrial concentration, from a regional enterprise in a peripheral European country, to becoming a part of a regional European company that itself has

²⁹ Stephen Gudeman / Chris Hann, Introduction. Ritual Economy and the Institutions of the Base, in: Stephen Gudeman / Chris Hann, eds, *Ritual and Economy. Studies of Post-socialist Transformations*, New York 2017, 1–30, 5.

³⁰ Ozan Nadir Alakavukar, 'We Are a Family'. A Critical Organisational Discourse Analysis, *International Journal of Business and Management* 1, no. 1 (2009), 1–10.

been acquired by the global leader in the industry. Nowadays the Bulgarian branch has less than 200 employees, compared to more than a thousand in its peak years during the socialist period, according to the respondent, the human resources (HR) manager of the company. 'Those who stayed are the ones who do not want to leave ... They are like family to each other, some have been here all their working lives,' the HR manager shares. She considers working for the French company a great opportunity for developing her expertise: 'We are at the forefront of the industry, we do everything following the leading professional standards and processes that apply to everyone in the company, regardless of the location' (HR manager Company A, August 2017). This equal treatment for the company workforce is something that the respondent emphasises again and again. It contrasts with the story about the previous Greek owners treating their Greek employees much better than their Bulgarian counterparts.³¹ As the geographical distance from the owners increases, so does the feeling for a less subjective treatment and liberation from the weight of regional cultural and historical stereotypes.

Equal treatment, however, brings different challenges. The French management has shifted the focus of internal events towards health-and-safety issues and organises a company-wide 'Safety Day' for all employees across the globe. However, this is not a welcomed initiative in Bulgaria, being seen as intrusive and counterproductive by many of the employees, who, after having worked without wearing protective helmets for years, are unwilling to do that or to follow other safety procedures. As the HR manager suggests, the staff in Bulgaria is 'like a family', i. e. there is a strong community in place so it can be expected that socialising, including celebrations, are part of their work life. However, that is not the case, at least not when it comes as an initiative from the management—'they do not want to have company celebrations, they want instead to be given extra money or vouchers. It's the same with going to the theatre—nobody wants to get free tickets, they want the money equivalent' (same respondent). When an event is organised, the only thing that matters is that there is an abundance of food, alcohol, and popular music. According to the HR manager, nobody wants to do anything but relax, so nothing that requires participation, like a game or even a prize draw, is organised. The HR manager's account is clearly reproachful of her colleagues' attitudes and would like them to be more involved and engaged. However, she herself also expresses her reservations and regrets about the way in which workplace celebrations have

³¹ Greek employers generally do not have good reputations, with recurring media stories about mistreatment of employees in their Bulgarian branches, e. g. the national TV reports on one such case, by pointing out it is not a precedent. Ilina Biserova, Gratski rabotodateli izbiagaha – rabotnitsite bez zaplati, *BNT 1*, 13 March 2010, https://news.bnt.bg/bg/a/24546-grycki_rabotodateli_izbjagaha_rabotnicite_bez_zaplati.

been organised: 'A few years ago we celebrated the Greek owner's eightieth anniversary. Now we wait to see how old we are going to be with the French. And at the same time our building will remain just a memory.' When I visited the company in the summer of 2017, I was welcomed as the last guest in what had been the company headquarters building since 1963, which was going to be vacated and closed in a matter of days. In the hallways, the HR manager enthusiastically showed me old framed photographs of different extraction and production sites but concluded that 'this will be all gone in a few days', referring to the building but also to the legacy of the company dating back to the first wave of post-World War Two industrialisation.

The account of the HR manager about their workplace celebrations becomes a discussion of the internationalisation of the company and a story of ambivalences and conflicting priorities. The employees' position, as represented and also reproached by her, is clearly a position of denial for demonstrating any engagement with the new management—not only in celebrations but also in work-related procedures. The newly introduced health-and-safety measures are not treated as a form of care by the employers but rather as an unnecessary intervention in well-established working practices; they are seen as an attempt by the employers to limit their liability. The preference for substituting social interactions, such as company celebrations, with cash-based interactions has multiple meanings. It reflects the worker's need to increase their disposable income and have the freedom to choose what to consume. But also, a monetary exchange precludes moral obligations for reciprocity implied in gift exchange. The ritual retrenchment observed by Gerald W. Creed in the 1990s has lingered on in this case, 'contributing to a spiralling sense of dislocation and helplessness'.³² For the HR manager, the pride and prestige of working for a global leading company is in conflict with the loss of the local company's identity, whose legacy and industrial heritage are not only not celebrated, but are not preserved and are lost. Both the employees and the HR manager 'wait to see what happens next', which indicates a lack of a sense of agency in a socio-economic situation driven by out-of-reach global forces and decision-making processes.

Celebrations as Recognition

In another industrial setting, a metal production plant (Company B), the alignment between the international management and the local staff took a different turn. The history of the plant followed a similar trajectory, driven by market consolidation. It dates back to 1958 and was state-owned until 1997,

³² Creed, *Economic Crisis and Ritual Decline*, 71.

when it was privatised and acquired by a Belgian company. In 2008, the Belgian company was acquired by a German competitor in the sector and the new company became a global leader. According to the respondent, who worked in the HR department of the company, when the new German CEO came, he was surprised by the local celebration traditions and did not believe that people wanted to spend so much time together outside work. In Germany, the company organises once a year a family picnic and it is a very informal and low-key event. According to the respondent, people come with their families, greet their colleagues, then many have a picnic with their own families and either leave or hang around a bit. In contrast, in Bulgaria, the biggest annual celebration is the Day of the Metallurgy Worker, celebrated on 5 November since 1963. It is one of several official professional holidays introduced by the socialist government, as part of the centralised effort to glorify labour and the working class. Work was at the core of the socialist citizen's identity, and the number and range of work-related celebrations grew consistently until 1989.³³ In many cases, professional holidays were introduced on the same day as existing Orthodox Christian holidays,³⁴ in order to refocus the celebrations towards professional values and meanings.³⁵ In the case of the Day of the Metallurgy Worker, the date was chosen because it was that day in 1963 when the largest metallurgy plant in the country started operating. The metallurgical industry was prominent and important, both politically and economically, for the socialist regime in Bulgaria.³⁶ The social construction of model factories with model workers was attempted, among other means, through frequent celebrations: 'Festivities in the enterprise, official praise and awards for their workers, rituals of community and other performative acts as well as the patterns of labor produced arenas of legitimacy.'³⁷

As different retrospective accounts claim, workers tolerated the ideological attempts at legitimation and compensated for them by enjoying the food, drinks, and entertainment.³⁸ The function of the professional holiday as a form

³³ Velcheva, *Praznik v delnika*.

³⁴ For an example of the contested process cf. Petar Petrov, *Saborat v Raduil. Za socialisticheskata transformacia na edin religiozen praznik, Balagarski Folklor*, no. 3–4 (1997), 104–129.

³⁵ Petko Yanev, *Tradicionni i novi praznici*, Sofia 1970.

³⁶ Ulf Brunnbauer / Visar Nonaj / Biljana Raeva, *Workers, Steel Factories, and Communism. Labor in Kremikovci (Bulgaria) and Elbasan (Albania) under State Socialism*, IOS Mitteilungen 62, July 2013, http://www.dokumente.ios-regensburg.de/publikationen/mitteilungen/mitt_62.pdf.

³⁷ Brunnbauer / Nonaj / Raeva, *Workers, Steel Factories, and Communism*, 35.

³⁸ e.g. Petar Petrov, *Sotsialisticheskite trudovi praznici i rituali. Kontseptsia i potreblenie*, in: Radost Ivanova et al. eds, *Sotsializmat – realnost i iliuзии. Etnologichni aspekti na vsekidnevna kultura*, Sofia 2003, 133–149; also interviews published on the website of project *The transition – voices, images and memory*, History Faculty of Sofia University, section 'Lichnosti na prehoda', <http://prehodbg.com/?q=book/export/html/75>.

of recognition, not only of five-year plan achievements, but of fundamentally hard work, was also significant. This is one reason why, the official professional holiday, even if it was in such a highly politicised industry, continued to be celebrated after 1989. According to the HR respondent, 5 November has always been an important occasion, and having a formal celebration with a sit-down dinner, music, and entertainment is an established norm. The word *banquet* was used in the socialist period, and in the metallurgy plant people continued to expect their banquet, regardless of the change of ideology and ownership. According to the respondent, who has also worked in other industries both in Bulgaria and abroad, the key to the success of any company celebration in Bulgaria is whether there will be an abundance of food and alcohol. The new CEO did not contest this 'long-established norm' and from the first such celebration, he managed to fit in very well in the banquet tradition, according to the respondent, because 'he has the personality for that, Germans are typically much more contained' (HR manager Company B, December 2019). The individual personality of the manager is emphasised as the reason for his successful adapting to the local tradition and this key role of the CEO's individual preferences will be further discussed.

If we summarise the stories from the two industrial sites, the existing 'family' in the mineral-processing plant symbolically refused to accept new members, by insisting on monetary compensation instead of celebrations, while in the case of the metallurgy plant 'the outsider' managed to fit in the existing and well-regarded tradition by being more like 'us' and less like 'them'. Beyond these stories based on the respondents' accounts, a comparative analysis of the two cases would need to take into consideration a much more complex entanglement of local factors. What is of interest for this study is not necessarily the reasons behind the described practices but the relative importance ascribed to conflicting identities (that of the local family and that of the global family, of the manager as a foreigner or as a member of the local community). As indicated theoretically, celebrations are such stages for discursive and performative identity claims, affirmations, and contestations.

'Modern' Celebrations, not Banquets

In contrast to the industrial settings, in professional services settings the socialist past is vocally rejected, while being part of a global organisation brings more enthusiasm. In a Bulgarian bank, part of a European bank group, (Company C), the public relations (PR) manager comments on their internal celebrations by saying: 'My mom used to go to banquets, we do things very differently, we are modern' (PR manager Company C, December 2019). The example, which serves as evidence for this statement, is a celebration organised for the opening

of the new headquarters office. In order to emphasise the state-of-the-art design of the building, employees and their families were invited to an exhibition inside the office of different new digital technologies, which they could try out. In general, in this organisation the internal celebrations are decided locally, i. e. without interference from the parent organisation, and the local 'strategy' is to have smaller, team-based celebration, because as a bank with national coverage, people are spread out across too many locations and it does not make sense, logistically or financially, to bring them together. Also, the teams are given the freedom to decide what they want to do. In other words, the opportunity for independent decision-making is promoted over an alternative discourse in which the larger organisational community is gathered. And as the example of the headquarters office opening demonstrated, the festive side of such events is de-emphasised while the novelty of the experience and its usefulness are brought to the front, as a reflection of the dominance of Pine and Gilmore's proposition in marketing discourse. In line with the digital theme of the event, people could share through social media with a specially designed hashtag. This is an element that has become a standard practice for company events, and reflects both the general mediatisation of festivities, but also the optimisation of employee events as promotional opportunities for the company.

In another Bulgarian bank, acquired recently by a different European financial group, (Company D), a member of the communications team in charge of organising company events describes their situation by saying: 'We are becoming global, but also staying local' (Communications executive Company D, February 2018). Once the bank became part of the financial group, employees started participating in quarterly challenges open to teams from all group organisations. According to the company website, these challenges are a 'group-wide initiative to strengthen the bond between all employees in the various countries where the group is active'. The underlining principle is that people do the same activity (e. g. running, solving quizzes, etc.) in different locations at the same time, while they are encouraged to compete and their achievements are converted in donations for different charities. Although that is the end result, the goals that are set are not related to solving social problems but to high aspirations. This can be interpreted as a reflection of the discussed wider cultural trends for self-improvement, well-being and playfulness, which are prioritised in relation to an alternative claim for solidarity and help for others. For example, one challenge is framed as setting a Guinness record, another, as running (the distance) to the Moon and back. At the same time, it is publicly stated on the company website that organising these non-work-related activities is directly linked to business outcomes, through the encouragement of 'exchanges of knowledge, best practice, experience, products, and services' within the company. Employees are 'urged to collaborate intensively and

develop shared creative solutions' so that customers are provided with faster, improved service. The 'creative' challenges are proposed to the more than forty thousand employees 'in order to experience group-wide co-creation and our collective commitment ever more intensively' (company website). The language describing the events is that of almost utopic business efficiency and continuous improvement—even when bank employees run 'for fun' they improve what the bank offers to customers. The example also clearly demonstrates that the initiative for bringing employees together is used as a medium to address the wider public and articulate what the management deems worthy about the bank and its customer orientation.

According to the communications team respondent working in the Bulgarian branch of the bank (Company D), people locally have been 'surprisingly active' in these initiatives, they have become a certain highlight in the social life of the organisation and are expected eagerly. However, this remark is not part of a narrative about team spirit, a cohesive organisation, or the importance of having fun. Instead, the instrumental use of the events is discussed as a self-evident fact: the respondent says 'everything we do is an instrument for achieving our business goals' when he discussed the work of the communications team in relation to internal events for employees. As a statement (regardless of the corresponding practices), this direct link between actions and outcomes sounds like an interpretation of the principles of scientific management and its insistence on economic efficiency and optimised goal-orientated and productive activity. It is also a reflection of an underlying understanding of a firm's role to solely pursue its business goals. Two other respondents speak directly to this by saying: 'Whatever the company does for its employees, it is clear that it is driven by bottom-line considerations' (HR manager in an IT company (Company E), December 2019). The other respondent worked for a leading Bulgarian software company that had been acquired, and at that point, he says, he was also welcomed in the global family of the new owner (the company was rebranded and, for a transitional period before the previous name was phased out, it was used with the addition 'part of X global family'). A few years later, the respondent and his team were downsized, of which he comments: 'Yes, American companies invest in creating a nice culture, and it is great while you are part of it. But the moment you are not needed, you are out, it's also part of the culture and it's a standard situation' (employee in a software company (Company F), December 2019). According to this statement, it is a norm that supply-and-demand and resource utilisation drive firms and their management, and this rationale is also interpreted as part of the culture. In other words, as divergent as the contexts of a mineral-processing plant (company A) and a leading software company (Company F) can be, in both cases there is a

sentiment that being 'part of the family' of a global business translates only into very contingent ties from the side of the parent organisation.

It is a telling fact about perceptions of company culture and lines of differentiation that in most of the conversations with respondents, the owning company is referred to in national terms, even when the company and the management teams are multinational. The Germans, the French, the Belgians, etc. becomes a substitute for functional-based descriptions as the 'management', the 'head-quarters', or the 'decision-makers' and as the examples above demonstrate, common nation-based stereotypes are easily referred to. At the same time, the individual characteristics of the CEO are recognised as a determining factor in how social activities, and company celebrations, in particular, unfold. When a respondent working in a multinational fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) company with experience both in the Bulgarian and in other European offices recounts their celebrations he shares:

It's surprising how similar it is in different locations—there is always the expectation for at least one big annual party, food, drinks, entertainment, etc. What makes the difference is the CEO—if he likes to party, the budget is bigger, the locations are fancier. When the new CEO came to Bulgaria the next party was at Princess Hotel, before we were going to Bedroom'³⁹ (brand manager Company G, February 2018).

On top of that, the results of the company were better than before, so that was not the excuse for choosing a less fancy venue, according to the respondent.

As the examples so far demonstrate, on the one hand, company celebrations are an organisational norm, they are expected everywhere and in a format that is to a large extent standardised. In the latter consumer-goods context, there is also a direct link between company performance and the magnitude of the celebration, meaning that it is business success, or the bottom-line that is celebrated. This is clearly a different logic from the professional celebration of metallurgy workers, for example, driven by the longevity of a recognition function of a celebration perceived as a tradition. The rejection of the old-school standardised banquet in the professional services settings, reflects a move towards more entertainment and less festivity, 'events' that very much follow Boorstin's four pseudoevent principles, as they are highly mediated and geared towards instrumental use. Their claim for authenticity is based on the use of attention-grabbing experiences and this is a globalising trend in organisational settings but also in the wider frame of social media use and the attention economy.

³⁹ Princess Hotel—a less renowned venue, in the periphery of the city, vs. Bedroom—a venue with the reputation for being exclusive, in the very centre of the city.

A Party—but for Whom?

As shown above, the discourse around company celebration is directly linked with achieving company targets, in the case of financial services and FMCG. But this link is also confirmed with the example of the design of the latest Christmas celebration of one of the above-mentioned banks. As is the case with many multinational companies, according to a respondent from an event agency, year-end celebrations are usually a local matter, while other occasions such as the company day, may be controlled by headquarters. Such is the case with the Bulgarian bank (Company D), and also, the organisation of the Christmas party is treated in the same way as all other requests to the communications team. After they receive a request, they develop a creative brief within the provided budget, and once that is approved by the management they proceed with planning and implementation, using the services of subcontractors such as event agencies. After the event is complete, a feedback form is distributed to determine participants' satisfaction, based on which the outcome of the event is reported. This process demonstrates the hybrid nature of company celebrations—they are subject to the same logic and procedures as the general business activity, even if they are not and are subject to normative, rather than contractual, considerations.

The overlap between company celebrations and regular business goes beyond the processes that are followed in organising the event and applies to the content too. The bank (Company D) Christmas party was specifically designed to improve the quality of the service employees provide to their customers. First, about a month before the party, employees were invited to submit interesting stories from their interaction with clients, with a clear indication to comment on how they resolved, or could improve, these situations. Out of the 4,000 employees of the bank, 780 people reacted to this call. Once the stories were collected, they were provided to an external company, which was tasked with preparing a programme for the party. This company has become popular in the last years in Bulgaria for organising a series of literature readings by famous actors and public figures of new works, and also for publishing some of them. A few of the authors participating in this project reviewed the bank employees' stories and, based on them, compiled texts to be read and performed by some of the actors. In that way the Christmas party programme was custom-made and 'co-created' by the employees—the content was relevant both for them and to the business goal of improving customer service.

According to the communications team member, the party was extremely successful, people were excited to hear their own stories through the medium of the popular literature readings format, and 'this was better than any regular program with generic jokes' (Communications executive Company D,

February 2018). The insistence on customised, tailor-made events, is a general characteristic of business celebrations (according to the respondent from the event agency) and this corresponds with wider social trends on valuing unique experiences. However, the impressions of one of the performers, also a respondent to this study, are less enthusiastic.

To me it seemed that people were there to have a dinner with their colleagues—while we were on stage people were not listening, they were chatting, and cutlery was making noise. And that's normal, why mix the two? So, I don't know ... before we started one of the organizers kept repeating and showing us which is the table of the bosses, of course, they want to please them (Performer, February 2018).

This comment underlies another set of ambivalences related to company celebrations—perceptions about the event can certainly not be homogeneous, as the audience is not homogeneous; and while a business-goals-related entertainment programme might be extremely successful for the management, it might not necessarily engage as much the rest of the employees, even if performed in a popular-culture format.

Respondents who oversee organising company celebrations mention the CEO's taste as one of the determining factors for the content of the programme, from the jokes and entertainment, to the musical selection. As mentioned already, the CEO's personality, as well as management style, has a significant impact on how and what is celebrated. When discussing the format of annual celebrations, the respondent who works as a PR at a bank (Company C) drew a parallel between two different CEOs—one treated the Christmas party as a general staff meeting and had a PowerPoint business presentation with key performance indicators, targets, etc. Another CEO had his own act, performing a Bony M song with a wig and disco-style leotards. There is clearly a difference of personalities underlying this divergence, but there is also a pressure on executives to be entertainers, because entertainment is promotable and also with social media viral potential.

From the point of view of respondents who are in charge of organising company celebrations, determining the content of the programme, is the key focus and challenge. Some of these respondents consider that there is a move away from the purely entertainment-based formats in which a popular star is invited and the attendants are an audience. 'Co-creation', a term already mentioned, is a trendy word and refers to the cultural (and marketing) logic that valorise creativity, unique experiences and acting as producers-consumers. For employees, that is not necessarily the essence of the occasion. An employee of the bank (Company D, in which staff stories were collected and dramatised), shares that for her the entertainment at the Christmas party is 'not that important anyways' and she values these events for the social-interaction opportunities they provide:

What is nice about the Christmas parties is that we can literally see each other. We are scattered in many different locations and buildings that I have people with whom I am regularly on phone and email but we only meet face to face when there is an occasion like this ... So, we always start by discussing work, then we complain a bit from our bosses and then we talk about personal stuff' (employee, Company D, December 2018).

From this point of view, company celebrations are not about improving company performance or entertainment, but about interpersonal communication and an opportunity to share. The subversive potential of such events is also marked—when people get together, they can not only improve their cooperation, as management would like, but also share frustrations and complaints.

In another multinational organisation (Company H), which located one of its service centres in Bulgaria, the question of what should be celebrated and by whom became a point of direct confrontation between management and employees. According to a respondent, who worked as a call-centre agent there, the initial discontent was pragmatic—because the centre was serving international clients, it had to work in accordance with the client's business hours, including on Bulgarian national holidays. The employees complained that they could not be off together with their friends and family, regardless of the overtime payment adjustments for working on official holidays. The discussion started in an internal online forum and it soon moved from pragmatic considerations about leisure time to arguments about national pride and the right to celebrate the holidays of the country in which a business is based, not where its customers are. According to the respondent, this was one of the first outsourcing centres in Bulgaria and at that time people still considered that they have these rights, while nowadays so many people are involved with outsourcing services in different time zones and markets that this is no longer an issue—the business logic of serving the client has prevailed.

Closing Remarks

Privately owned firms are one of the key agents of the post-socialist transformation in Bulgaria, serving as a link between global flows and local conditions. The focus of this paper is on firms that were acquired or established by international businesses, in which case, the transfer of knowledge and practices coincides with the inflow of foreign direct investment—as one of the examples demonstrated (Company D), people not only work for a global financial group, they also participate in global challenges 'for fun', which are expected to contribute directly to business performance. The introduction both of firms and of foreign ownership has provoked enthusiasm and high expectations on the one hand, and scepticism and resentment on the other.

The specific object of enquiry of this study are company celebrations, defined broadly as events organised by employers for their employees that are not directly linked to the business at hand, and so are not a contractual obligation for staff. In Western managerial discourse, such practices have been discussed not only as instruments to achieve bottom-line results, but also as a reflection of the increasing need for employers to address the consumption preferences of their employees.

As the empirical examples demonstrated the resulting cultural practices of work celebrations are a heterogeneous mix ranging from the replication of long-established formats like the professional-day banquet, to real-time multisite international competitions promoted as a way of improving cooperation and above all, customer service. In industrial settings the socialist-time recognition of workers has created a strong tradition, which, however, is not always practised, leading to resentment and clearly stated rejection of engaging with the 'global family'. Where the banquet tradition is kept, it is also used to distinguish between the local 'us' and foreign management. A range of invented and adapted 'new traditions' have resulted from the interaction between international management practices and local contexts. The format of events can be determined as much by industry norms, as by the personality of the CEO and by the imperatives of ubiquitous social media use.

It can be argued that in consumer businesses, the rhetoric, as well as the practice, related to employee events is monopolised by a concern with business outcomes. The proposition that anything an employer does for the employees is driven by concern for the business outcome of such actions is normalised both in discourse and in practice. The content and the media use of events celebrating the employees' togetherness are motivated by goals related to the improvement of customer outcomes. In response, employees tend to demonstrate a predominantly pragmatic attitude towards the managerial attempts at practising company culture through entertainment by focusing above all on the sociality afforded by such occasions.

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